EXPANDABLE WELL SCREEN

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is related to a provisional application entitled WELLBORE CASING U.S. Ser. No. 60/111,293, filed Dec. 7, 1998, and having Robert L. Cook, David Brisco, Bruce Stewart, Lev Ring, Richard Haut and Bob Mack as inventors thereof, and to a provisional application entitled ISOLATION OF SUBTERRANEAN ZONES U.S. Ser. No. 60/108,558, filed Nov. 16, 1998, and having Robert L. Cook as an inventor thereof, the disclosure of each of these applications being incorporated herein by this reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to operations performed in conjunction with subterranean wells and, in an embodiment described herein, more particularly provides an improved expandable well screen for use in such operations.

It is well known in the art to convey a well screen into a subterranean well in a radially reduced configuration and then, after the screen has been appropriately positioned within the well, to radially expand the screen. Such expandable screens are beneficial where it is desired to position the screen below a restriction in the well, such as a restriction due to damaged casing, variations in open hole wellbore diameter, the need to pass the screen through a relatively small diameter tubular string before placing the screen in operation in a larger diameter tubular string or open hole, etc.

Presently available expandable well screens are constructed of multiple circumferentially distributed screen segments overlying an expandable inner tubular member. An outer shroud protects the screen segments against damage as the screen is being conveyed in the well, and ensures that each segment is appropriately positioned in contact with the inner tubular member and the adjacent segment, so that each segment is supported by the inner tubular member and no fluid leakage is permitted between adjacent segments, when the screen is expanded downhole. The inner tubular member has a large number of longitudinally extending slots formed therethrough, with the slots being circumferentially and longitudinally distributed on the tubular member. When the inner tubular member is expanded, each of the slots expands laterally, thereby becoming somewhat diamond-shaped.

Unfortunately, there are several problems associated with these types of expandable well screens. For example, manufacture is quite difficult due to the requirement of attaching individual screen segments to the inner tubular member in a circumferentially overlapping manner, and the requirement of positioning the segments within the outer shroud. Construction of the outer shroud is critical, since the shroud must be expandable yet sufficiently strong to maintain each screen segment in contact with an adjacent segment when the screen is expanded. If the screen segments are not in contact with each other, fluid may flow into the screen between the segments. Additionally, the inner tubular member configuration makes it difficult to connect the screen to other tubular members, such as blank sections of tubing, other screens, etc.

From the foregoing, it can be seen that it would be quite desirable to provide an improved expandable well screen. It is accordingly an object of the present invention to provide advancements in the technology of expandable well screens.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In carrying out the principles of the present invention, in accordance with an embodiment thereof, an expandable well screen is provided in which a filter element thereof is circumferentially pleated. The filter element may circumscribe an inner perforated base pipe. Associated methods are also provided.

In one aspect of the present invention, a disclosed well screen includes a filter element which is constructed in a radially compressed pleated configuration. The filter element may be made of a woven metal material. Subsequent radial expansion of the filter element "unpleats" the material, so that the filter element takes on a more circular cross-section.

In another aspect of the present invention, the filter element is constructed in multiple layers. An inner layer has openings therethrough of a size which excludes larger particles from passing through the openings, thus filtering fluid flowing through the openings. An outer layer has openings therethrough which are larger than the openings through the inner layer. The outer layer may be utilized to protect the inner layer against damage.

In still another aspect of the present invention, the well screen may be utilized in a method of servicing a subterranean well. In the method, the well is gravel packed with the screen in its radially compressed configuration. After gravel has been deposited in an annulus about the screen, the screen is radially enlarged, thereby displacing the gravel in the annulus.

In yet another aspect of the present invention, the well screen may be utilized in another method of servicing a subterranean well. In this method, perforations formed outwardly from the wellbore are pre-packed, that is, sand flow inhibiting particulate matter is deposited in the perforations. The screen is then radially enlarged opposite the perforations. In this manner, the screen retains the particulate matter in the perforations.

These and other features, advantages, benefits and objects of the present invention will become apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art upon careful consideration of the detailed description of representative embodiments of the invention hereinbelow and the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. **1** is a side elevational view of a well screen embodying principles of the present invention;

FIG. **2** is a cross-sectional view through the well screen, taken along line **2**—**2** of FIG. **1**;

FIG. **3** is an enlarged view of a filter element of the well screen;

FIG. **4** is a schematicized view of a first method of servicing a subterranean well, the method embodying principles of the present invention;

FIG. **5** is a schematicized view of a second method of servicing a subterranean well, the method embodying principles of the present invention; and

FIG. **6** is an enlarged view of a portion of the well of FIG. **5**.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Representatively illustrated in FIG. **1** is a well screen **10** which embodies principles of the present invention. In the following description of the screen **10** and other apparatus and methods described herein, directional terms, such as "above", "below", "upper", "lower", etc., are used for convenience in referring to the accompanying drawings. Additionally, it is to be understood that the various embodi-

ments of the present invention described herein may be utilized in various orientations, such as inclined, inverted, horizontal, vertical, etc., without departing from the principles of the present invention.

The screen **10** includes a filter element **12**, which is shown in FIG. **1** in its radially compressed pleated configuration. The filter element **12** is generally tubular and is circumferentially pleated, that is, it is folded multiple times circumferentially about its longitudinal axis. In this manner, the filter element **12** circumference as shown in FIG. **1** is substantially smaller than its circumference when it is in an "unpleated" or radially enlarged configuration. As used herein, the term "pleat" is used to include any manner of circumferentially shortening a circumferentially continuous element, and the term "unpleat" is used to include any manner of circumferentially lengthening a previously pleated element.

Referring additionally now to FIG. **2**, the screen **10** is shown from a cross-sectional view thereof. In this view, it may be more clearly seen how the filter element **12** is folded so that it is alternately creased and thereby circumferentially shortened. In this view it may also be seen that the filter element **12** radially outwardly overlies an inner generally tubular perforated base pipe **14**. The base pipe **14** is optional, since the filter element **12** could be readily utilized in a well without the base pipe. However, use of the base pipe **14** is desirable when its structural rigidity is dictated by well conditions, or when it would be otherwise beneficial to provide additional outward support for the filter element **12**.

The base pipe **14** is preferably made of metal and is radially expandable from its configuration shown in FIGS. **1** & **2**. Such radial expansion may be accomplished by utilizing any of those conventional methods well known to those skilled in the art. Additional methods are described in the application entitled WELLBORE CASING referred to above. For example, a device commonly known as a "pig" may be forcefully drawn or pushed through the base pipe **14** in order to radially outwardly extend the base pipe's wall.

Note that opposite ends **16** of the base pipe **14** are generally tubular and circumferentially continuous. In this manner, each of the ends **16** may be provided with threads and/or seals, etc. for convenient interconnection of the screen **10** in a tubular string. Specialized expandable end connections are not necessary. Thus, if it is desired to connect the screen **10** to another screen or to a blank (unperforated) tubular section, each end **16** may be connected directly thereto.

The filter element **12** is preferably made of a woven metal material. This material is well adapted for use in a filter element which is folded and unfolded, or otherwise pleated and unpleated, in use. The metal material may also be sintered. However, it is to be clearly understood that other materials, other types of materials, and additional materials may be utilized in construction of the filter element **12** without departing from the principles of the present invention.

Referring additionally to FIG. **3**, an enlarged cross-sectional detail of the filter element **12** is representatively illustrated. In FIG. **3** it may be clearly seen that the filter element **12** is made up of multiple layers **18, 20, 22, 24** of woven material. Fluid (indicated by arrows **26**) flows inwardly through the layers **18, 20, 22, 24** in the direction shown in FIG. **3** when the screen **10** is utilized in production of fluid from a well. Of course, if the screen **10** is utilized in injection of fluid into a well, the indicated direction of flow of the fluid **26** is reversed.

It will be readily appreciated upon a careful examination of FIG. **3** that layer **22** has openings **28** in its weave that are smaller than those of the other layers **18, 20, 24**. Thus, the layer **22** will exclude any particles larger than the openings **28** from the fluid **26** passing inwardly therethrough. The layers **18, 20** inwardly disposed relative to the layer **22** are not necessary, but may be utilized as backup filtering layers in case the layer **22** were to become damaged (e.g., eroded), and may be utilized to provide structural support in the filter element **12**.

In one unique feature of the filter element **12**, the layer **24** outwardly the inner layer **22** and has openings **30** in its weave which are larger than the openings **28** through the inner layer **22**. Thus, the outer layer **24** will allow particles to pass therethrough which will not be permitted to pass through the inner layer **22**. However, one of the principle benefits achieved by use of the outer layer **24** is that the inner layer **22** is protected against abrasion, impact, etc. by the outer layer **24** during conveyance, positioning and deployment of the screen **10** in a well.

Referring additionally now to FIG. **4**, a method **40** of servicing a subterranean well embodying principles of the present invention is representatively and schematically illustrated. In the method **40**, the screen **10** is utilized in a gravel packing operation in which gravel **42** is deposited in an annulus **44** formed between the screen and a wellbore **46** of the well. Methods of depositing the gravel **42** in the annulus **44** about the screen **10** are well known to those skilled in the art and will not be further described herein. However, it is to be clearly understood that a method of servicing a well embodying principles of the present invention may be performed using a variety of techniques for depositing the gravel **42** in the annulus **44** and using a variety of types of gravel (whether naturally occurring or artificially produced).

As shown in FIG. **4**, the screen **10** is interconnected between a plug or sump packer **48** and a packer **50**. The construction of the screen **10**, particularly the configuration of the base pipe **14** as described above, convenient interconnection of the screen. In actual practice, one or more other tubular members may be interconnected between the screen **10** and each of the plug **48** and the packer **50**.

Perforations **52** extend outwardly through casing **54** and cement **56** lining the wellbore **46**. The screen **10** is positioned in the wellbore **46** opposite the perforations **52**. It is not necessary, however, for the screen **10** to be positioned opposite the perforations **52**, nor is it necessary for the perforations to exist at all, in keeping with the principles of the present invention, since the method **40** could alternatively be performed in an open hole section of the well.

When the gravel **42** has been deposited in the annulus **44** about the screen **10**, the screen is radially expanded from its initial radially reduced configuration to its radially enlarged configuration. Such radial expansion of the screen **10** redistributes the gravel **42** in the annulus **44**, for example, causing the gravel to displace upwardly about the screen in the annulus, eliminating voids in the gravel, etc. Additionally, radial expansion of the screen **10** may displace a portion of the gravel **42** into the perforations **52**. Note that it is not necessary for the filter element **12** of the screen **10** to be completely unpleated in the method **40**.

Referring additionally now to FIG. **5**, another method **60** of servicing a subterranean well embodying principles of the present invention is representatively and schematically illustrated. Elements shown in FIG. **5** which are similar to those previously described are indicated in FIG. **5** using the same reference numbers. The screen **10** is depicted interconnected